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Out of the Belly Shall Flow Rivers of Truth: Food as an Analytical Lens into Slavery in Nineteenth-Century North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

How can one gather new understandings of the experience of enslaved peoples without locating new historical archival documentation? The dilemma is not resolved through the discovery of new sources, but instead addressed by viewing those same sources with a new lens, a food lens. Food, whether it be in terms of the diet, its distribution, or in the body itself, has the power to control and inspire. This research uses food to illuminate the experiences of the enslaved as recorded in their own narratives in North Carolina during the late nineteenth century. Through the voices of the people themselves, it was discovered that food was not just a source of pain or control; it also inspired resistance, community building, and black culture. The breast milk of enslaved mothers was viewed as a source of nourishment for their children, yet also a window to introduce racial inferiority to black children. The growing and stealing of food was a method for black men to reclaim their masculinity and for the enslaved to resist their subjugation. Food contextualized the hierarchies of relationships within North Carolina during the period under study. Slave owners used food as a mechanism of both punishment and reward, while the enslaved used food to aid runaways and to foster community. The cultural significance of food and its consequential health associations within slavery have implications for the present. Thus, food became a medium through which enslaved people spoke their truth, allowing for a new perspective on nineteenth-century North Carolina history and later times.

Keywords: slave resistance, slave narratives, North Carolina, food, slave diet

Introduction

Are there any new and novel ways to think about the experiences of enslaved peoples in North Carolina during the nineteenth century? To begin answering this question, one must navigate through the multiple relationships between enslaved individuals and their masters that were defined by hierarchies, punishments, and rewards within southern society. The intricacies of gender, family, culture, and resistance, and the dichotomies between the psychological and the physical must also be touched upon to comprehend the human experience within the context of slavery. At first glance, an impossible task appears to arise due to the multi-dimensional experience of a person enslaved. The answer to the original question set forth above begins on the ground and ends in the stomach. Food is necessary to survival, and thus the power it holds physiologically can be understood; however, the emotional, mental, and cultural implications of food are equally important. Food, whether it be in terms of the diet, its distribution, or the body itself, has the power to control and inspire. And who better to inform this journey into the slave society than through those individuals who experienced it first hand? Therefore, this article will

analyze slave narratives using food as a theoretical framework. An analysis of slavery from a food vantage point reveals the horrors of black oppression, the building of the black family, complexities of black health, and the creation of black culture, all while showcasing the people's humanity, despite their oppressors' tactics of control within nineteenth-century North Carolina.

Looking into the Slave as an Individual

For many of the enslaved people in North Carolina, the scheduling of their day revolved around food, following what is called an "agricultural clock and calendar" (Allen and Jewett 2004, 194). The time that most individuals arose for work in the morning, the amount of time they spent toiling in the fields, and their sleeping schedule all depended upon the planting, harvesting, and processing of food in each cycle of the agricultural year (Allen and Jewett 2004, 194). The enslaved person's daily activity was controlled by food, as many plantations produced food as one of their main sources of income or grew food, such as corn, for local consumption (Hilliard 2014, 125). Therefore, the structuring of an enslaved individual's life was regulated by food and this same form of food regulation was also applied to their physical body.

The meticulous control over the food produced by the bodies of enslaved black mothers illustrates the psychological and physical oppression they endured. Harriet Jacobs, a woman enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, told of her family history in her autobiography. Jacobs recounted that her mother and her mother's mistress were both "nourished by [her] grandmother's breast.…[I]n fact [her] mother had been weaned…[so] that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (Jacobs 2000, 9). Black women being forced to nurse children that were not their own was not uncommon, and Jacob's narrative shows that from birth, black children went without so that white children could have more. Martha Allen, a former enslaved individual from Raleigh interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project, stated that black mothers would "stick de babies in at de kitchen do' on dere way ter de fields" so that the enslaved cooks could breastfeed their babies while they worked.[1] Recognizing that food was important for nourishment, enslaved mothers navigated within the confines of an oppressive system in order to ensure their children were fed, which demonstrated resilience. In spite of their efforts, a forced gap between black mothers and their children emerged out of the suppression of their sharing of food. Moreover, the utilization of the domestic worker within the slave society as a source of food had greater implications than simply their supplying of breast milk.

The enslaved domestic workers' ability to eat the leftover food of their masters, their access to quality food, and their duty to prepare food to the master's liking positioned them uniquely within North Carolina slavery (Blassingame 1979, 250–51). Charlie Barbour, an ex-enslaved individual born in 1851 in Smithfield, recalled that his mother was a cook in the master's house and that she would "sneak [him] a cookie or a cobbler an' fruits."[2] In this instance, stealing food from the master's house was a mechanism that domestic workers used to show affection and care for others, and was in fact another form of resistance. Many historians suggest that a hierarchy was established among the enslaved working in the house versus the field, and that the differential access to food between the two types highlighted a kind of class division

[1] Interview with Martha Allen, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 14, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[2] Interview with Charlie Barbour, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 77, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

(Blassingame 1979, 251). Enslaved persons working in the house experienced more instances of abuse due to situations involving food; for example, if the master did not like the food prepared, they were often punished physically (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 54). An individual from Blue Wing, North Carolina, shared with an interviewer a story about another person who was whipped by the master because she burned his biscuits.[3] Thus, the role of females in feeding their families as well as their masters' families placed a lot of pressure on them, notably in ways that were very different from the experiences of enslaved men.

As a method of regaining status within the black family, enslaved men, when given the option of hunting, fishing, or gardening, often did it with zeal, because the ability to provide food was an expression of authority and manhood (Blassingame 1979, 179). Louisa Adams, born in the 1850s in Richmond County, recollected that her family was allowed to keep a garden and hunt for game in order to supplement their meals, yet the food was still not sufficient.[4] However, Ms. Adams's father, she said, "raised his chilluns on game.…He would work all day and hunt at night."[5] The provision of food was an entry point for black men to gain respect from the men around them and "lead their wives" (Blassingame, 1979, 179). Although Ms. Adams's father did "back-breaking" work during the day, he decided to hunt in order to feed his children. Following the historian Blassingame's (1979) thought process, perhaps this was a way to reclaim his identity as a man. The intricacies of the family life of enslaved persons and the contrasting gender roles are illuminated through the lens of food and can be even more instructive when analyzing the lives of the children.

Children had a different relationship to food. The diet of an enslaved child was distinct from that of an enslaved adult and this could affect their perception of slavery as a whole, sometimes in a way that showcases a structured and generational servitude that characterized a slave society. On some plantations, for children, eating took a ritualized form.[6] For example, every Sunday on a plantation in Raleigh, the children had to go to the big house to eat and had to be "bathed, dressed" and have "their hair combed."[7] The spectacle was meant more for the slave masters than for the benefit of the enslaved children. Providing these young people with food was one thing, but to make them get dressed up for it as an occasion suggested that eating in the company of whites was a luxury. According to Ms. Anderson, also from this plantation, the owners "believed in giving the slaves plenty of fruit, especially the children."[8] The practice of ensuring that the next generation of the enslaved was properly nourished did not result from slave masters having softened their hearts toward black children. Instead, it stemmed from the assumption that if children were fed well at a young age, their survival rate would increase significantly (Vlack 1993, 120). This is why Ms. Anderson's master had doctors present every Sunday at these dinners to help ensure the health of the next generation of the enslaved.[9] As a child within this system, Mary Anderson did not comprehend the totality of what happened to

[3] Interview with Travis Jordan, 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 45, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[4] Interview with Louisa Adams, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 2, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[5] Ibid., 14.
[6] Interview with Mary Anderson, 23 August 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 21, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

her. She ended up believing that slavery was good; this is important because it reveals the limitations of narratives as a source of data that reflects the entire scope of black experience.[10] Aware of her limitations, she said, "I think slavery was a mighty good thing…but I can only speak for those whose conditions I have known during slavery and since."[11] Nonetheless, Ms. Anderson's story reveals the psychological impact that occurred due to the presence or absence of food among the enslaved.

Looking into the Slave Master

Slave masters used positive reinforcement, a form of psychological control, by rewarding the people with food for adhering to their established rules and regulations. Moreover, they used food to create a system of surveillance in which some enslaved individuals looked for opportunities to inform on others to keep their masters abreast of any news they might find useful. This phenomenon can be seen in the account of Blount Baker, an ex-enslaved individual from Wilson, who told his master that a patrolman coerced him into stealing a belt so that he might go see his lover in another plantation, then beat him later for doing so.[12] The master in return gave the "honest slave" a possum to eat that Mr. Baker expressed "wuz shore good."[13] The master was able to use food as an incentive due to its scarcity. If the enslaved had enough food to sustain themselves, then being given food would not have motivated them to betray the trust of another of the enslaved or help their master in any manner. The power dynamic between the master and the enslaved individual was thus made all the more uneven by the master's control of nourishment.

Access to food was a cornerstone of the material inequality between masters and enslaved persons. The very nature of handing out a set amount of rations to another human being, despite their requests or need for more, highlights the oppressive power that food had over the people enslaved (Blassingame 1979, 179). Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese noted in her study of the plantation household that the mistress was in charge of the distribution of food for her family, and that only occasionally would she involve herself in the rationing of food for the enslaved on the plantation (Fox-Genovese 1988, 102). The reason being was that the "master usually preferred to distribute the slave's rations himself, thereby demonstrating his role as provider and source of all largesse" (Fox-Genovese 1988, 102). There was a distinct difference in the roles of the female slave master, often referred to as the mistress, and her male counterpart, the master. Bob Jones, an ex-enslaved person from Raleigh, commented on this difference and noted how the master was nicer than the mistress, because she would often beat the enslaved individuals who worked in the home based on her attitude.[14] Having seen how the power of food defined relationships between themselves and their masters, while defining the difference between master and mistress, the enslaved people often graded the kindness of their masters on how well they were fed.

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Interview with Blount Baker, 10 September 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 64, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Interview with Bob Jones, 17 August 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 24, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.

Throughout the interviews, formerly enslaved individuals equated how "good" or "bad" their masters were based on the amount of food they were given or the freedom to obtain food for themselves. Bill Cump and Richard Moring, both from Raleigh, spoke well of their masters, but also mentioned that they were allowed to raise animals, had enough to eat, and were able to grow food from a garden (Cump 1941, 208; Moring 1941, 139). They were enslaved on separate plantations, but both Mr. Cump and Mr. Moring shared the similar ideology that plentiful food correlated with having a good master. On the other side of the spectrum, when interviewees spoke about the cruelties of their masters, this was often followed by them disclosing that they did not have enough food. Jacob Manson, an ex-enslaved person also from Raleigh, told his interviewer, right after he spoke of the whippings that he had witnessed, not only about the enslaved people being hungry, but also that they "was fed outen trough," meaning a large container used for animal feeding.[15] The fact that all three men were from the same area, yet had completely different experiences, illustrates that there was not a set system for feeding enslaved people within a certain area; it often depended upon what the master decided. However, among slave masters themselves, food was sometimes used to judge their character.

In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass eloquently captures the extent to which masters judged each other in Maryland based upon whether they gave the enslaved people enough to eat (Douglass 1968, 35). He states, "every city slave holder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well," demonstrating this social ranking amongst slaveholders, which revolved around food (Douglass, 1968, 35). This judgment system based upon the distribution of food also existed among slave masters in North Carolina. Isaac Johnson, an ex-enslaved person from Lillington, did not have poor quality food; in fact, he recalled that he had enough to eat.[16] However, Mr. Johnson shared that because his master provided his people with such quality food, "other white folks said he loved a nigger more den he did white folks."[17] This obvious utilization of food as a mechanism of comparison within the social context of slave masters illuminates the usefulness of food as a lens into one aspect of slavery as well as the enslaved people's experience.

Looking into Resistance and Punishment

An obvious form of resistance that enslaved individuals partook in was the stealing of food from their masters (Vlach 1993, 122). Slavery was built upon the premise of using someone else's labor to receive the benefits of that labor, while denying the individual actually doing the labor any gain. Many North Carolina interviews touched on instances in which the enslaved persons stole food. Such practices were so common that an ex-enslaved individual from Raleigh stated that she believed that the habit of stealing in order to prevent starvation was a trait that was passed down generationally.[18] There was even a song that was created and sung by the enslaved to denote how often they stole: "Some folks says a nigger wont steal, I caught six in my corn

[15] Interview with Jacob Manson, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 96, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[16] Interview with Isaac Johnson, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 30, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Interview with Louisa Adams, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 2, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

field. Run nigger run, the patteroller ketch you, Run nigger run like you did the other day."[19] This learned practice of stealing food not only demonstrates the relative scarcity of food, but also the daily forms of resistance that were present amongst the enslaved. However, there was a danger to stealing food as addressed in the song, and the master's retaliation for the act was one of the mechanisms used to maintain black subjugation and obedience.

The punishments that the enslaved experienced while attempting to feed themselves were often cruel, yet the people fought back by using food to build relationships. Harriet Jacobs told of an individual that she knew who, having stolen "a pig from his master, to appease his hunger," was beaten so badly that he ran away and only returned because he assumed he was dying from the severity of his wounds (Jacobs 2000, 52). Jacobs herself was punished for attempting to stop at her grandmother's house to get food while on her way to the fields, Her grandmother, "to avoid detaining [her], often stood at the gate with something for [her] breakfast or dinner" (Jacobs 2000, 13). Masters inflicted physical harm on those who were already trying to relieve themselves of the pangs of hunger, but in doing so they not only strengthened the bond between the enslaved people but provided them with an avenue of support through the sharing of food.

Stephanie M. H. Camp's work discusses the idea of truancy, in which enslaved people hid in the woods to escape their masters for a short duration of time. While the truants were absent, others would leave food in secret places to aid them (Camp 2004, 84). This act of communal resistance was also present within North Carolina. Charles Manly served as governor from 1849–1851, and his son Basil Manly was later elected mayor of Raleigh (Cartledge and Von Storch, n.d). Bertcha Lane worked for this elite family as the maid for Caroline Manly, the wife of Basil Manly, and at one point ran off into the woods for three weeks because she believed that Caroline was going kill her (Camp 2004, 48). Ms. Lane was beaten randomly and for no apparent reason.[20] It is clear that Bertcha's family as well as other enslaved individuals around her knew that she was being treated unfairly, because when Governor Manly asked them for Bertcha's whereabouts they did not disclose any information. According to an interview with Bertcha's daughter, "niggers on different plantations fed [Bertcha] by carrying things to certain places and hidin' places" to support Bertcha's truancy.[21] It was not until Governor Manly promised Bertcha's safety upon her return that she came out from hiding, showcasing the leverage that some of the enslaved used to advocate for themselves in a system built for their suppression.[22] In light of this, we can conclude that food not only gave the people the means to perform acts of truancy, which they used in pursuit of better treatment, but provided the enslaved community members with a mechanism to stand in solidarity with each other through collective resistance.

One way that slave masters sought to incentivize the enslaved to continue the laborious tasks of their bondage rather than resist was with a form of food-based entertainment called candy-pullings. Candy-pullings were an uncommon treat for the people. This was an activity where two people would "stick their hand in lard…then dip their hands in [cane] syrup…and take it out to cool," before enjoying the sugary dessert (Covey and Eisnach 2004, 184). The food product cane

[19] Interview with John C. Bectom, 1 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 95, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[20] Interview with Hannah Plummer, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 180, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[21] Ibid., 181.
[22] Ibid., 182.

was not native to North Carolinian soil, so many slave masters paid money for a shipment of cane to their plantation so their enslaved people could partake in this recreational activity (Covey and Eisnach 2004, 184). Cornelia Andrews recalled in an interview that her master had candy-pullings for the enslaved once a year, even though she noted that they did not "raise no cain" on their plantation.[23] Many other ex-enslaved individuals from North Carolina also decided to include their memories of candy-pullings in their interviews. The rarity of this form of entertainment, coupled with the fact that masters supervised and orchestrated its parameters, suggests that this event was to placate the enslaved rather than reward them for good behavior. However, could this qualify as true entertainment since it was controlled by privileged individuals who inflicted pain and anguish daily? In seeking autonomy from the uncertainties of bondage, some of the enslaved community members initiated their own events to express their joy with food and dancing, while others made use of the space they were allotted by their masters to entertain themselves through food.

Looking into Slave Culture

While the preparation and sharing of food among the enslaved during festivities cultivated a sense of black community, it was also yet another setting for masters to promote psychological acquiescence to enslavement. Among the secret signals that informed the people of a potential secret gathering, enslaved women would go off into the woods "in order to cook in secret" in preparation for the late-night festivities (Camp 2004, 49). The joy that enraptured the people as they danced at these secret social gatherings, freed from the watchful eyes of their masters, fostered black community, and cooking was foundational to these events (Rawick 1972, 71). John Bectom, an ex-enslaved individual from Fayetteville, noted that his masters did not allow them to attend dances, but some of the people "slipped off to the unknowin's."[24] Therefore, the presence of secret gatherings within North Carolina for the purpose of uncensored entertainment was "especially important to [slaves]" (Blassingame 1979, 106). Many slave masters did not allow their enslaved to engage in these community-cultivating activities, not only because the food that was prepared was usually stolen, but because it exposed people to a feeling that masters could not control: unity. For example, Charlie Barbour's master, after allowing his enslaved people to have a feast and a dance, thanked them for their work and said that they were "good, smart slaves."[25] Thus, food, having the power to unite and build community, was also used to control and encourage blacks to be faithful enslaved individuals.

The celebration of holidays like Christmas were joyous from the enslaved community's perspective because of the amount and type of food that they were provided. The religious undertones of Christmas were not the main messages throughout the slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project interviews in North Carolina, yet the large feasts prepared by masters for the entire plantation marked this day as a holiday.[26] Julius Nelson, an ex-enslaved person

[23] Interview with Cornelia Andrews, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 28, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[24] Interview with John C. Bectom, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 93, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[25] Interview with Charlie Barbour, 7 June 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 74, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.
[26] Interview with Richard Rountree, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 233, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.

from Raleigh, recounted that he and others would serenade their masters and receive fruits and bags of candy.[27] Mr. Nelson's account was common, and many historians note that, around this season, often plantation owners made feasts for their enslaved people that included "whole hogs, cooked sheep, peach cobbler and apple dumplings and alcohol" (Blassingame 1979, 107). If this type of food made community members like Julius think that holidays were "happy times" because of the variety and quantity of food available, it is necessary to pursue a deeper understanding of what types of food made up the diet of the enslaved people in North Carolina.[28]

The average diet of the enslaved in North Carolina, although grossly limited, revealed the cultural significance of food, since "slave food" became understood as southern food. Anna Wright of Wendell encapsulated this metamorphosis by asking her interviewer, "Does you know de old southern way of makin' baked chicken dressin?"[29] The ingenuity that the enslaved used to not only cook their food, but to utilize unpopular food defined southern culture over time (Covery and Eisnach 2004, 4). The usual diet provided by the masters consisted of "cornmeal, side-bacon and molasses" (Rawick 1972, 68). However, from the time of their arrival to America, enslaved people were "preparing savory stews and rice dishes for their owners quite unlike the lightly seasoned English dishes they had known" (Blassingame 1979, 103). The food metamorphosis began as an extension of African culture, yet as time progressed the circumstances of slavery for blacks produced a new southern food culture. However, there is no escaping the "fundamental fact that whites had greater opportunity to vary their diets" (Hilliard 2014, 52), and the repercussion of blacks not having a well-rounded diet negatively impacted their health.

Looking into Health and Medicine

The complex issue of the North Carolina slave diet was not simply a matter of the low quantity of food; the diet did not meet nutritional requirements consistent with the people's labor-intensive work schedules (Dunaway 2003, 106). On plantations that had less than ten enslaved individuals, the masters were economically unable to provide them with produce that was not self-grown (Dunaway 2003, 106). In rare cases in which whites and blacks were fed the same meals, usually on small plantations and farms, the enslaved people still suffered from malnutrition because their intense physical labor required a nutritional variety that was nonexistent (Dunaway 2003, 106). In Julius Nelson's interview, he shared that the enslaved had "Ashe cakes for supper and breakfast" and "De smart nigger et a heap o' possums an' coons."[30] In order to survive, the people could not rely on what their masters gave them and thus had to rely on hunting, stealing, and growing food in a garden. Some were only able to consume food that was of poor nutritional value, being that some masters only let their people eat fruit when it had fallen from the tree and was already rotten (Dunaway 2003, 105). Insofar as the enslaved ate a lot of pork and corn, they developed pellagra from a lack of niacin (Clay, Schmick, and

[27] Interview with Julius Nelson, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 145, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Interview with Anna Wright, 17 August 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 423, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.
[30] Interview with Julius Nelson, no date available, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 145, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.

Troesken 2019). Also, some developed scurvy from a lack of fruit, and others suffered from rickets caused by a vitamin D deficiency (Dunaway 2003, 105).

Rather than accept the health impediments that slave masters inflicted on them, enslaved blacks utilized food as a source of medicine. There were apparently two methods of obtaining healthcare while laboring under slavery in nineteenth-century North Carolina. One ex-enslaved individual from Raleigh described it best in her interview, stating, "When we got sick you sees we stayed with the doctor, he looked after us, but we had our herbs too" (Lassiter 1941, 41). The level of distrust in doctors to adequately treat slave-specific illnesses increased the people's preference for traditional healing mechanisms, and sometimes the successes of those alternative healing practices were persuasive in and of themselves (Schwartz 2006, 62). Slave masters also grew medicinal herbs in their gardens, but the enslaved blended the medicine that they learned about from the doctors with traditional remedies, using any resources they had (Schwartz 2006, 62). Fannie Moore, an interviewee from Asheville, gave a detailed account of the medicines her grandmother made to cure colds, fevers, stomach aches, and colic in babies, using plants including sassafras, cabbage leaves, snakeroot, and rat veins, respectively.[31] This role of healer was not limited to the female enslaved, as George Rogers spoke of an "old colored man" who doctored the children, giving them "roots and herbs."[32] The genius of many of the enslaved in transforming food into medicinal treatment for themselves not only demonstrates their ability to adapt, but also their intelligence in the cultivation of food for their health. The reverberations of the ingenuity of enslaved blacks were not limited to this specific time in history, but indeed continue to affect the present day.

Looking into the Present

Contemporary African Americans, many of whom are descendants of enslaved blacks, continue to construct social systems representative of their culture, while coping with discrimination. The popularity of soul food and the health issues associated with black populations are uncovered by an analysis of how food is contextualized in their lives. Fried chicken, collard greens, candied yams, pig's feet, and peach cobbler are just a few of the dishes that characterize the African American food experience, and are best known by the colloquial term *soul food*. This specific terminology characterizing this type of food emerged during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s as a means to connect blacks dispersed throughout America to their cultural roots (Penrice 2018). Although food was able to foster cultural unity among African Americans, it has also been responsible for disproportional incidences of chronic illness. Blacks in America are prone to developing diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity at higher rates than their white counterparts (Satia 2010). The reason for this occurrence has roots in slavery, being that enslaved people received poor nutritional content that erupted in illness, similar to the numerous present-day blacks that live in obesogenic environments that limit their access to healthy food (Dunaway 2003, 101; Lovasi, Huston, Guerra, and Neckerman 2009). Thus, analyzing food in present-day America reveals the continued health disparities that have traversed generations of African

[31] Interview with Fannie Moore, 27 September 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 134–35, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.

[32] Interview with George Rogers, 27 September 1937, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. II, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 223, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/.

Americans. However, there are many initiatives that have been undertaken by blacks to take control over their health and channel empowerment from food, rather than accept illness, as witnessed in community outreach programs that provide resources and information.

Conclusion

The insight that food has provided into the complex lives of enslaved people in North Carolina during the nineteenth century describes but a microcosm of what enslaved blacks experienced throughout America during the antebellum period. Food was not only a route to physical health, but a source of control for the slaveholders, as well as a source of inspiration for blacks to be creative enough to meet their needs, build relationships, and resist their oppressors. According to George Rawick, interviews with those formerly enslaved "enable us to see maltreatment of the slaves within the context of the total life of the slaves who, while oppressed and exploited, were not turned into brutalized victims, but found enough social living space to allow them to survive as whole human beings" (Rawick 1972, 55). Thus, using food as an analytical lens into the experiences of enslaved people helps retain the humanity of blacks in terms of their handling of oppression, building of social structures, and creation of cultural traditions. The same challenges that many blacks face in America today in being innovative, having families, experiencing joy, and benefiting from good health in the midst of an inherently racist society can also be understood through the lens of food. In attempting to understand how a person navigates through society, looking at what they eat can reveal many truths.

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